

# Good Ducking Day-

By Rae Mack

**I**t was a perfect day for hunting ducks on Currituck Sound in northeastern North Carolina. It was cold (33 degrees F). A 15-knot wind was blowing across the frigid water, whipping up waves between 1 to 2 feet. On days like this, ducks don't ride on the water. They fly to seek shelter, and they fly low (where visibility is better and wind resistance is less) and closer to the water—making them good targets for the hunters. Hunters feel that when ducks are on the move and see decoys, they think, "This is a nice place to be," and they fly in. Because of this, duck hunters long for cloudy, windy and cold weather—the nastier the better. It's what is called a "good ducking day."

What was supposed to be a good day for duck hunting proved to be a terrible day for a Sailor and the last day for four other people in his boat.

At 0645, the Sailor loaded his boat with hunting gear, decoys, his large hunting dog, his 8-year-old son, a 51-year-old friend, and another 33-year-old friend who also brought along his 6-year-old son. They set off across the sound toward a cove on the other shore, about five miles away.

Halfway across the choppy sound, the motor on the 16-foot, open aluminum boat sputtered and failed. The boat came off plane, and a wave hit the port side. The occupants started bailing. One of the passengers (the 51-year-old) moved to the port side, stood up, and fell overboard. Another wave hit the boat, and it sank stern first. The owner of the boat then threw a life preserver to the man overboard, gave another one to his other adult passenger, and put on one himself. (The children were already wearing PFDs.)

By this time, the man overboard had disappeared under the water. The only thing visible was the floating PFD. The dog and one of the children (the 6-year-old) were floating away from the boat in the rough water. With only the boat's bow above water, the Sailor held onto his son and friend while they waited for another boat to come by. But none came. After 90 minutes, his son died from hypothermia. The father emptied gas cans and tied them and a buoy to his son's body so rescuers would be able to

locate him. Then the boy drifted away. When his friend died a short time later, the Sailor tied decoys to him also. Then he continued waiting—now alone.

When it got dark and the group hadn't returned home, one of the wives called the Coast Guard and reported them overdue. "We got the call at 1845," said BM1 William Midgett, of the Coast Guard station at Elizabeth City, N.C. He, SA Matt Weaver, and SN David Donohue set out on a search-and-rescue mission.

"We didn't know what we would find," said Midgett. "Without special gear like our Mustang suits, survival time in water that cold is usually under three hours."

To reach the area of the sound where the boat went down, the Coast Guardsmen had to haul their boat by trailer to the same boat landing where the ill-fated group of hunters had put in the water. Then, because their boat is larger than the 16-footer the hunters were in, they couldn't take a short cut through a narrow and shallow canal to the sound. They had to travel in deeper water around a peninsula. It was almost 1930 when they reached the area where the boat had gone down and started searching. Their only light was the piercing beam of the search lights. Finally, they found what they were looking for.

"We were surprised to find this guy alive after being in the water for almost 14 hours. According to everything written, he shouldn't have survived," said Midgett.

A Coast Guard helicopter airlifted the survivor to a hospital, where he was treated for hypothermia. "He was shivering, but wasn't even frostbitten," said MK3 Keith Conley, USCG, who went to the hospital to question the survivor. "He stayed in the hospital for only a few hours, then was able to leave on his own."

*[Note: Search teams recovered the bodies of the two children and one of the adults the next day. The older man's body was found by two fishermen more than a month later. It was about four miles from where the boat sank.—Ed.]*

Why would one survive when others didn't? The answer to that question can be partly found in the

# Bad Boating Day



This skiff is typical of the craft duck hunters use. Note the side markings, which are an attempt to camouflage these boats. Hunters in this story tied tree limbs around the frame of the boat to enhance this effect, which further added to the boat's weight.



This PolarKraft boat is similar in design to the one that sank in Currituck Sound.

clothing worn by the hunters. The survivor was wearing waist-high waders made of Neoprene, which protected him from the frigid water. The other hunters weren't so prepared.

The man who first disappeared was wearing rubber waders, which undoubtedly filled with water and dragged him below the surface. Also, according to his brother, he always had his pockets full of ammunition when he went hunting. The other hunter and the two children were dressed in winter clothing, but nothing that would protect them from being immersed in such cold water.

You may wonder even more about why five people (two of them young children and one a middle-aged man who recently had undergone open-

heart surgery) would get into a poorly maintained, 20-year-old aluminum boat, along with a large dog, hunting equipment and decoys with weights attached. Then they further weighed down the boat by tying tree boughs to it for camouflage and set out in high seas with strong winds. The duck hunting may be great, but is the sport worth the risk? That's where personal risk assessment comes into play. Each adult in that boat had the responsibility for weighing risks, taking them into consideration, and making the decision to go on this hunting trip.

Not only was the boat overloaded, but according to a hunting guide who helped pull the submerged boat out of the water, it wasn't seaworthy. Stewart Walker, who guides hunting parties on the sound, said, "That boat didn't have any braces. It would twist if you stood up and walked around on it. Also, it had a quarter-inch crack down the middle that had been patched with roofing tar."

BM1 Midgett, a native of the area whose relatives are watermen, said, "When you depend on the water for your livelihood, sometimes you have to take risks in order to make a living. But when you're going out for pleasure, you don't. I've been on the water in rough weather many times, including that day, because it was my job. But I would never take my kids out on a day like that. The adults had a choice; the children didn't."

No matter what we do, we have to make risk decisions. The difference between a foolhardy act and a well-planned one is what that decision is based upon. Weigh the risks in all aspects of your life, whether it is a 10-second process (Do I risk making it across the road in front of that oncoming car?) or a more lengthy one. (Let's take into account the weather, the seaworthiness of my boat, and the condition of my passengers before we go on this boating trip. Do I have all the emergency equipment I'll need if my engine conks out or if the boat sinks?)

This tragedy has forever altered the lives of three families. Wives are widowed, mothers weep for lost sons, and a father is left to grieve and wonder, "What if...?" for the rest of his life. We don't want this to happen to you. ❏